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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 003259

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KCUL](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: CHINESE POP PHILOSOPHER SPARKS CONFUCIAN SENSATION  
-- AND AMPLE GRIPING

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.  
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary  
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¶1. (C) The sudden spectacular popularity of Yu Dan, a media professor whose televised lectures on Confucianism have broken ratings records, has set Beijing's chattering classes buzzing about ideology, Yu's integrity and China's spiritual needs. Telegenic and plainspoken, Yu has inspired comparisons to Oprah, although she may be closer to a pop psychologist such as Dr. Phil. Her simplified brand of Confucianism has a self-help flavor, emphasizing respect for authority and the importance of family. Critics charge that her pronouncements oversimplify Confucius, paper over social divisions and amount to little more than toeing the official Government line. In fact, our contacts speculated that Yu's messages of cohesion and introspection likely please the propaganda guardians. But while the "Yu Dan Phenomenon," as the Mainland press calls it, may not signify a massive popular embrace of Confucian ideals, it has struck a chord with viewers hungry for guidance in handling the growing complexity of everyday life in modern China. Besides, as one contact put it, the critics are just jealous of Yu's success. End Summary.

A Star Is Born  
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¶2. (C) A diminutive, telegenic and unknown media professor has become an overnight sensation here with her homespun TV lectures featuring the teachings of Confucius mixed with a healthy dose of pop-psychology and folksy advice. Professor Yu Dan's presentations on Confucianism first aired on the China Central Television (CCTV) television show "Lecture Room," which invites guest scholars to discuss academic topics, literature and the arts in front of a studio audience. The shows were a spectacular hit last fall, grabbing 20 times the number of viewers "Lecture Room" usually draws, Chinese media reported. The network has rebroadcast the series twice. Yu released a companion book this spring, entitled "Insights on the Analects," that has sold more than a million copies. Her book signing events are pulling in crowds of excited fans. Dozens of Mainland and Western media outlets have featured profiles of Yu and she has attracted thousands of participants in her web chats.

¶3. (C) Yu's main message is that Confucius' teachings transcend the centuries and can be applied to the complexities of everyday modern Chinese life. In her lectures, Yu has stressed themes such as respect for authority and not "blaming others" for social

injustices. She preaches introspection and love for family while discounting individualism and blind personal ambition.

#### The Propagandists Are Pleased

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¶4. (C) That such messages seem to be resonating in society is likely music to the ears of China's leadership, our contacts said. For the Central Government, Yu's brand of Confucianism constitutes a reassuring alternative to more controversial belief systems, said Li Qiang (protect), Dean of the School of Sociology at Tsinghua University. The more people buy into Confucianism, this thinking goes, the less likely it will be that they turn to unsanctioned religions or movements such as Falun Gong, which the leadership sees as threats to Party authority. Li and other scholars said they are unaware of Yu enjoying the patronage of specific top leaders, but some speculated that Propaganda guardians may be among Yu's most active boosters. Noting the ubiquity of articles and programs by or about Yu Dan, Xu Fangzhou (protect), a professor at Communications University of China (CUC) who knows Yu well, quipped that "the Propaganda Department is probably arranging her promotional schedule these days."

#### Desperately Seeking an Ideology

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¶5. (C) The Pop Confucianism craze comes at a time when Party theoreticians are desperately seeking solutions to what Li of Tsinghua called China's

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ideological void. Communism and Marxism are discredited as ideologies, Li said, speculating that there is some hope in official circles that a form of Confucianism can serve the purpose -- one that bolsters the leadership and encourages social stability and cohesion. In this vein, with its emphasis on spiritual rather than material well-being, Yu's message melds well with Government efforts to manage rising expectations, said Victor Yuan (protect), head of the Horizon public opinion polling firm. Yuan surmised that officialdom likely welcomes Yu's pronouncements because they do not advertise lofty hopes for social equality or promote unattainable dreams of affluence. In fact, Yu claimed in a highly publicized web chat on Sina.com that the Analects are compatible with President Hu Jintao's "harmonious society" concept because they place value on filial piety and respect for authority.

#### "Resist Yu Dan to the End"

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¶6. (C) But Yu's rise, and her populist reading of the Confucian canon, has unleashed a bitter reaction among some journalists and academics. In March, a number of classics professors from China's top universities disseminated an open letter on the Internet entitled "Resist Yu Dan to the End." The scholars charged that her interpretation of Confucius is riddled with inaccuracies and oversimplifications. They called on the media to "cease its adulation of Yu Dan," on CCTV to cease broadcasting her lecture series and on Yu herself to "apologize to the entire nation." Yu has also drawn the ire of journalists who see her as a pawn of the Government. A recent opinion piece in the progressive Southern Metropolis Daily newspaper ripped Yu, implying that she is irresponsibly encouraging uncritical support for the authorities and their initiatives. The article asked rhetorically why someone who appears to be a modern academic would

instead play the role of "a scholar-official from feudal society."

#### A Second Rate Scholar

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17. (C) Xu of CUC, who is a leading academic authority on broadcast media and an advocate for increased openness, described Yu as a "first-rate communicator and second-rate scholar." Born in 1966, Yu escaped the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution and graduated from the prestigious Beijing No. 4 Middle School, Xu related. She became a media professor at Beijing University in the 1990s and only earned her much-publicized Ph.D. last year. One of her favorite pastimes is reading kung fu novels. Yu's husband, with whom she has a daughter (born in 2006), is an entrepreneur. Xu said that in his view, Yu should be viewed with skepticism for two reasons. The first is that her encouragement of what he called "popular obedience" risks stifling personal initiative and public debate about important social and political issues. The second is that because Yu herself "has never known hardship," she has no business prescribing self-help remedies for people facing real difficulties, no matter what philosophy she espouses.

#### A Booming Self-Help Industry

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18. (C) The self-help angle of Yu's lectures is exactly what has made her so popular, said Yuan of Horizon, citing informal research he has done indicating that the self-help industry is booming in China. If you look in any bookstore, the shelves are bursting with titles offering guidance on everything from creating a blissful family life to getting ahead in business, Yuan remarked. Such products have resonance because the number of complex influences on -- and choices in -- Chinese people's lives has grown dramatically during the past generation. Not long ago, an individual could not even get a divorce without approval from their work unit. Now people switch jobs if they simply don't like their boss. As part of this, Yuan maintained that some believe Confucianism can offer a compass to help navigate such issues. Yu's interpretations, simplified and presented in an enticing package, pack a more appealing punch than Classical Confucianism, which can be dense and hard to grasp. People want to make sense

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of their lives, Yuan said, and they believe Yu can help them.

#### Jealousy

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19. (C) Xu of CUC acknowledged that jealousy motivates much of the grousing emanating from academia about Yu's stylized tele-Confucianism. "Professors just want to be famous themselves," he said. Nonetheless, he predicted that Yu's popularity would fade in due course, and CCTV will have to tread carefully. When a program becomes a big hit in China, one of two things happens: either a) the show kills itself by adding bells and whistles to attract an even bigger audience that then overwhelm the show's original charms or b) the Government starts paying attention and then attempts to use the show as a propaganda tool. "Viewers get wise to that," Xu said, "and then the show is dead."

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